

Counseling on Healthy Diet and Physical Activity to Prevent Cardiovascular Disease

The US Preventive Services Task Force recently published recommendations on behavioral counseling for healthy diet and physical activity to prevent CVD in adults with risk factors.

What Is Cardiovascular Disease?

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) refers to the buildup of plaques, which cause blockages, inside important blood vessels in the body. These blood vessels can include the arteries of the heart (**coronary heart disease**), brain (**cerebrovascular disease**), and legs (**peripheral arterial disease**). Cardiovascular disease can cause heart attacks, strokes, and death. Coronary heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States.

Risk factors for CVD include older age, smoking, high blood pressure, being overweight or obese, diabetes, high cholesterol, and a family history of heart disease. In general, people with higher risk of CVD benefit more from prevention efforts.

What Does Counseling on Healthy Diet and Physical Activity Involve?

A healthy diet is defined as a balance of foods that help a person achieve and maintain a healthy weight, support health, and prevent disease. Counseling to promote a healthy diet focuses on (1) increased consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, fat-free or low-fat dairy, lean proteins, and plant-based oils and (2) decreased consumption of foods that are high in salt (sodium), saturated or trans fats, and added sugars.

Physical activity is broadly defined as any activity that enhances or maintains overall health and physical fitness. It is recommended that adults engage in at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity per week in addition to strength-training activity at least twice per week.

Behavioral counseling involves behavior change techniques such as goal setting, active use of self-monitoring, and addressing barriers related to diet, physical activity, or weight change. Motivational interviewing can also be used. Counseling can be done by primary care clinicians as well as a range of trained professionals, including nurses, registered dietitians, nutritionists, exercise specialists, counselors trained in behavioral methods, and lifestyle coaches.

What Is the Population Under Consideration for Counseling on Healthy Diet and Physical Activity?

This recommendation applies to adults with risk factors for cardiovascular disease such as high blood pressure or high cholesterol. It is not specifically targeted for adults with diabetes, obesity, or those who smoke, as these populations are targeted in other US Preventive Services Task Force (USPSTF) recommendation statements.

What Are the Potential Benefits and Harms of Counseling on Healthy Diet and Physical Activity?

There is adequate evidence that behavioral counseling on healthy diet and physical activity decreases CVD events (heart attacks, strokes, and death). There is convincing evidence that counseling improves blood pressure, cholesterol, blood glucose, and weight. Effects on behavioral outcomes (eating and exercise habits) need greater study, as results have been variable. Potential harms of counseling on healthy diet and physical activity are very small, limited to potential injuries from exercise.

How Strong Is the Recommendation to Provide Counseling Interventions on Healthy Diet and Physical Activity?

Based on current evidence, the USPSTF concludes with moderate certainty that intensive counseling interventions to promote a healthy diet and physical activity in adults with CVD risk factors have a moderate net benefit.

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Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is a leading cause of death in the United States. A healthy, balanced diet and regular exercise reduce the risk of serious cardiovascular events such as heart attack, stroke, or death.



Population

Adults with risk factors for CVD such as high blood pressure or high cholesterol



USPSTF recommendation

The USPSTF recommends offering or referring adults with CVD risk factors to behavioral counseling interventions to promote a healthy diet and physical activity.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

US Preventive Services Task Force
https://www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/uspstf/topic_search_results?topic_status=P

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Author: Jill Jin, MD, MPH

Author Affiliation: Associate Editor, *JAMA*.

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